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## Divine Abstractions: Spiritual Expressions in Art

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# DIVINE ABSTRACTIONS

SPIRITUAL EXPRESSIONS IN ART



2009-2010 23<sup>RD</sup> ANNUAL SHELDON STATEWIDE EXHIBITION  
SHELDON MUSEUM OF ART UNIVERSITY OF NEBRASKA-LINCOLN



Ralph Albert Blakelock, *Heavy Woods - Moonlight*, undated, oil on board, 6  $\frac{1}{8}$  X 9  $\frac{3}{4}$ "  
 UNL-Gift of Mrs. Olga N. Sheldon

Front: Herbert Bayer, *Yellow Centre*, 1970, serigraph, 29  $\frac{1}{2}$  x 29  $\frac{1}{2}$ "  
 UNL-Gift of Saul Steinberg through the Martin S. Ackerman Foundation

# DIVINE ABSTRACTIONS

## SPIRITUAL EXPRESSIONS IN ART

In Northern Europe during the early 1800s, artists began departing from the rationalism of the Enlightenment and the realism of traditional artwork. Their desire to express the mysterious and unseen essence of the divine through their artwork transformed the way we think about art. Called Romanticists, these artists valued subjective experience over reason and the individual experience rather than the collective. They abandoned conventional religious iconography and produced private, intensely meditative images, depicting the divine as something eternal and infinite. These artists believed that material reality hindered experiencing the divine. They sought to fracture the shell of physical reality to access an inner truth.

Historical factors contributing to this transformation included the diminished influence of the Catholic Church, improved education, and foreign travels. Intellectually, they were guided by historically far-ranging philosophies. Pythagoras, for example, taught them that there was only one substance, "the absolute," from which all things, from the minutest particle to the farthest star, were composed and that a world soul animated

this unified reality. Spinoza also proclaimed that everything is a manifestation of the one substance, his concept of God. Jacob Böhme, a German mystic, had a vision of this unitary reality when he saw divine energy shining forth from every object around him. Madame (Helena Petrovna) Blavatsky in the 19<sup>th</sup> century introduced Theosophy; its doctrine asserts that all cultures and religions strive for spiritual awareness and would unite in the universal absolute when they evolved to a higher consciousness.

While the Romanticists were active in Germany, New England Transcendentalists inspired the Hudson River School artists. Influenced by Swedish philosopher, scientist, and Christian mystic Emanuel Swedenborg, Transcendentalists also saw a spiritual world underlying nature. American artist Ralph Albert Blakelock, for instance, maintained a Romantic artistic style, mystically reordering reality. Dusky evening scenes with luminescent moonlight became his signature style. *Heavy Woods – Moonlight* communicates a spiritual essence that envelops the viewer in a meditative stillness. Norman Geske, Blakelock biographer, notes that the artist "proceeded with an imagination that



Wassily Kandinsky, No. VIII, *Die Kleine Welten*, 1922, woodcut, 10 3/4 x 9 1/8"  
UNL-E.M. Hall Collection



Josef Albers, *Formulation: Articulation*, 1974, two-color serigraph poster,  
21 5/8 x 21 5/8"  
UNL-E.M. Hall Collection

was singularly free of any allegiance to established procedures" and was "critically and tragically" ahead of his time in his abstract impressionistic style.<sup>1</sup>

Artists throughout Europe and the United States accepted Romanticism's idea of a divine inner essence to reality, though they could not have foreseen the enormous changes awaiting the world in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Astonishing new conceptions of reality, produced by microscopic biology, physics, astronomy, and psychology, revitalized abstract art. In response to the challenges of understanding abstract art, German artist and architect August Endell wrote in 1889, "We are at the beginning of a totally new art, an art with forms that mean nothing and remind one of nothing and represent nothing, yet they will be able to move our souls so deeply, so strongly."<sup>2</sup>

Wassily Kandinsky often is credited with initiating abstract art. He describes his early experiences with color as lyrical; the houses and churches he saw in Russia appeared to him so imbued with color that they gave him the sensation of being in a painting. A significant event in the development of Kandinsky's artistic vision came at an exhibition of Claude Monet's impressionist paintings. The work *Haystacks* was indecipherable to him; he could not see haystacks, and that distressed him. His mind rejected this painting, but his unconscious was deeply moved. The Theosophical teachings of H. P. Blavatsky had another transformative effect

on Kandinsky's life. Theosophists believe creation originated from a single point; forms emanating from it are circles, triangles and squares—motifs often found in Kandinsky's artwork.

In 1911, Kandinsky published his seminal treatise "Concerning the Spiritual in Art," a clarion call to abstraction. Kandinsky wrote, "[an] inner necessity compels the artist to create; and if the creations possess positive values, they will have spiritual power."<sup>3</sup> After World War I, Kandinsky returned to Germany and taught at the Bauhaus, the German center for modern art and design. Among his Bauhaus associates were Hans Arp, Joan Miró, Piet Mondrian, Paul Klee, Josef Albers, Herbert Bayer, and Lyonel Feininger. A student of science, Kandinsky incorporated images of electrons and other atomic discoveries into his art. *No. VIII, Die Kleine Welten (No. 8, Small Worlds)* suggests a frenzy of worlds at the microscopic level: black lines and shapes vibrating with such energy that they leap from the white ground.

*Formulation, Articulation* by Josef Albers is a complicated geometrical arrangement of shifting rectangular shapes, addressing the complexity and ambiguity of vision. The shapes interact to evoke a sense of transcendence, or mysticism beyond the optical. Aware of this element in his work, Albers said, "in science one plus one is always two, in art it can also be three, or more."<sup>4</sup> Hans Arp, a fellow Bauhaus artist, often exhibited with avant-garde artists, including the *Blaue Reiter*



Hans Arp, *Marron, Jaune, Bleu*, undated, three-color lithograph, 12 1/2 x 9 7/8"  
UNL-F. M. Hall Collection

(Blue Rider) group, Expressionists, Dadaists, and Surrealists. In 1931 he became a founding member of Abstraction-Creation. Arp created works with a playful lightness and humor. The forms in *Marron*, *Jaune*, *Bleu* speak of nascent life and suggest the progression of life from birth to death. He often focused on the oval as a symbol of life, spiritual regeneration and divinity.

During his 60-year career, Herbert Bayer worked in numerous artistic genres and media including abstract and surrealist painting, sculpture, and environmental art. Bayer said, "The artist is a mirror in which one sees what one would not see without him. The artist naturally reflects the visible as well as the invisible."<sup>5</sup> In *Yellow Centre* the vibrant colors and concentric geometric circles invoke a mandala-like harmony of form, design and balance. The circle is an important symbol in many cultures, often representing cycles of eternal return, the cosmic eye of god, and the unity of opposites into oneness.

Upon discovering Cubism, Lyonel Feininger said, "[F]or the first time I was able to think, feel, and work for myself."<sup>6</sup> Working intuitively, Feininger developed a crystalline style with stark lines and drifting clouds of color. Because he also was a musician, the rhythmic and expressive power of music often informed his art. *Sunday* portrays a unique sense of personal order in its pulsating lines and flowing colors. Feininger taught at the Bauhaus but left when he felt it began to subordinate art to



Abraham Rattner, *Hands Upreaching*, 1947, oil on canvas, 38 3/16 x 51 3/16"  
UNL-F.M. Hall Collection

industrial design; he believed that art was a crucial spiritual expression, not an industrial production.<sup>7</sup>

Abraham Rattner was known as a deeply spiritual man; his life and art resonated with religious themes. *Hands Upreaching* resembles stained glass, with vibrant colors dramatically contained by dark lines. A multitude of heads and hands interlace and overlap, striving and reaching; the large hand of light is open in the gesture, perhaps, of divine benevolence. Always concerned with the sacred within and beyond the observed world, Rattner painted so that "the eye of the spirit achieves the work of the corporal eye." For Rattner, this is a moment of the divine.<sup>8</sup>

Charmion von Wiegand moved in the circles of the avant-garde in New York City. In the 1920s, she began painting and writing about art.





Alfred Henry Maurer, *Double Portrait*, 1930, oil on composition board,  
21 1/2 x 18"  
UNL-Bequest of Bertha Schaefer

After interviewing Piet Mondrian, von Wiegand collaborated with him in an essay about his philosophy of art. Mondrian's art was inspired by Theosophy, Cubism, and Neo-Plasticism, a movement seeking spiritual harmony and order through mathematical forms, lines and balance without symmetry. Following Mondrian's lead, von Wiegand's artwork became abstract, with the geometric grids and primary colors, similar to her mentor's signature style.

Beginning his artistic career in realism, Alfred Maurer soon realized that style did not answer his inner need. He broke with realism and devoted the remainder of his life to working in the styles of Fauvism, Cubism and abstraction. Maurer lived with his father, a noted Currier and Ives lithographer, who rejected and disparaged his son's avant-garde art. In *Double Portrait*, Maurer envelopes the figures with dark Fauvist chartreuse, the fractured faces are sliced into overlapping plains. The figures' mouths are curved into tight archaic smiles that contrast with the piece's tense lines and colors.

The Northwest School, founded by Mark Tobey, was an association of mystical painters in the American Northwest. After studying the religions of Asia and the Middle East, he embraced the Baha'i World faith, which espoused a belief in the spiritual unity of all humankind and the underlying unity of the major world religions. These views found voice in Tobey's art. He avoided focal points in his artwork; the anonymous figures in *Icon* emerge as fleeting shapes then are subsumed into the formless grounding color, posing as a symbol for the divine infinite.

Gustave Baumann was among the first artists to immigrate to the American Southwest, residing in Santa Fe for more than 50 years. There he developed an interest in Native American culture, religion and pictographs. *Immergence* renders his impression of Southwest Native Americans, their pueblos and ancestral spirits. Charles Rain painted





Gustave Baumann, *Immergence*, 1954, oil on panel, 27 3/4 x 28"  
NAA—Nebraska Art Association Collection



Helen Lundeberg, *Cosmicide*, 1935, oil on Masonite, 40 x 24"  
NAA—Gift of the Peter Kiewit Foundation

*Figures with Masks* in the totemic surrealist style, one of the more progressive stylistic developments in the United States. It is a mixture of microscopic biological fauna and primitive shamanistic figures. The shapes conjure a sense of dual realms, the physical and metaphysical.

Originally a writer, Helen Lundeberg pursued a career in art after taking an art class taught by her future husband, Lorser Feitelson. In 1934, she and Feitelson founded Subjective Classicism, or Post-Surrealism. The group moved away from Surrealist compositions exploring the unconscious, to the conscious choice of subjects. This permitted an intellectual unfolding in her artwork, which appealed to Lundeberg. *Cosmicide* was meticulously painted to eliminate brushstrokes and to convey an air of illusion and mystery. The objects drift in a void, serenely unaware of the impending death of the cosmos. The trapezoid shape of *Cosmicide* increases the painting's otherworldly effect.

As a young man, Salvador Dalí worked in the style of realism. He later experimented with Cubism, Dadaism, and Surrealism, eventually arriving at his signature style of Neo-Mannerist realism. Dalí was fascinated with science, optical illusions, religion, and psychology. Sigmund Freud's theory of the unconscious inspired Dalí and he often described his artwork as "hand painted dream photographs."<sup>9</sup> In *Dream of Cosmic Unity*, Dalí sought to synthesize Christian iconography with

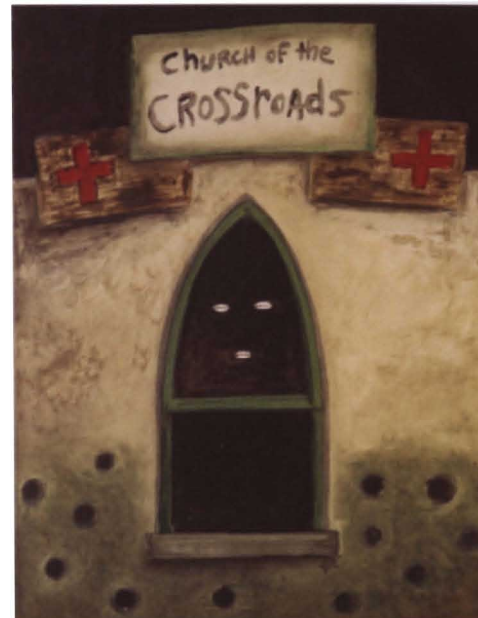
mystically inspired images. His meticulous attention to detail heightens the power and mystery of working with unconscious narratives and traditional iconography.

Christian motifs inspired American artists Leroy Burket and Corita Kent. In *Crucifixion*, Burket's portrayal of Christian iconography is controlled and discrete; the dark grays and greens foster a sense of foreboding and detachment from the subject. The stylized faces appear to be inhuman masks; the bodies are lifeless abstracted shapes. Sister Mary Corita Kent's *About the Resurrection* is a celebration of rebirth; the primary colored forms communicate warmth and joy. Kent was recognized for her many silk-screen prints, among them was the image created for the 1985 "Love" postage stamp.

José de Rivera was a journeyman tool and die worker in Chicago. After three years study at Chicago Studio School and travel in Europe and Africa, de Rivera began his artistic career in sculpture. The years working with industrial tools and metals proved invaluable preparation for his consecutively numbered *Constructions*. The lessons of physics, such as the indestructible energy underlying what we see as reality, shaped de Rivera's art. Light became his co-creator and an element, for him, reflective of infinity. De Rivera believed that the content, beauty, and excitement of his structures came from "the interdependence and relationships of the space, material and light."<sup>10</sup>



Sister Mary Corita Kent, *About the Resurrection*, 1962, screen print, 22 x 29"  
UNL-F.M. Hall Collection



Renée Stout, *Legba (Church of the Crossroads)*, 1998, monotype,  
25 7/16 x 19 1/16"  
UNL-Mercedes A. Augustine Acquisition Trust

Renée Stout creates assemblage artwork exploring the spiritual roots of her African heritage and her experiences in American culture. Her goal is to convey to viewers an inclusive experience of mind and spirit. Commenting on her art, Stout said, "I'm attracted to spiritual societies ... [spirituality] seems like a means of survival in a world that you can't always understand."<sup>11</sup> An aura of mystery pervades *Legba (Church of the Crossroads)*, the disembodied face and the pockmarked wall are disquieting. Elegba is the trickster deity in the Yoruba religion of West Africa and the master of the crossroads, where the visible and invisible worlds intersect—a locus of danger and opportunity.

Cheryl Wall's experience as a volunteer dream-analysis subject for a Jungian psychiatrist inspired her to paint disguised images of dreams in gestural color-shapes on raw canvas. Wall waits "[F]or the moment when everything—shape, color, space, light, gesture, experience and emotion—converges to express a celebration of life."<sup>12</sup> The title *Apotheosis #38* communicates this striving toward the inspirational moment when, like an alchemist turning dross into gold, the physical transforms into spirit. Intimating that spirit is without boundary, Wall often paints beyond the traditional dimensions of the canvas onto its edges.

The inspiration and title for Susan Dunkerley's photograph, *This is the Shape of the Soul*, came from a poem written by the Islamic Sufi writer, Rumi. In this enigmatic photograph, a bowl and



Cheryl Wall, *Apotheosis Series #38*, 1983, acrylic on canvas, 48 x 60"  
NAA—Nebraska Art Association Collection

fork take on a sanctified aura that bids the viewer to reexamine the meaning of ordinary utilitarian objects. Dunkerley constructs and photographs deceptively simple dioramas in her studio windows that encompass complex psychological dynamics. She said of her work, "I attempt to represent what cannot be seen; that inner life of thought, emotion and spirit."<sup>13</sup>

A student of Josef Albers, John Day in *Erebos-Evening* dramatically presents the theme of dueling darkness and light. 'Erebos' in Greek mythology means deep blackness or shadow and was the name of the passageway to Hades. Day, his own name synonymous with light, intentionally juxtaposes light and dark to create intriguingly ambiguous and contradictory artwork that refers to death and immortality. Imprinted along the dark



Susan Dunkerley, *This is the Shape of the Soul*, #4, 2001, toned gelatin silver print, 24 x 20"

UNL—Robert E. Schweser and Fern Beardsley Schweser Acquisition Fund through the University of Nebraska Foundation

corridor of *Erebos-Evening* are spectral human forms; in the distance is an opening into the infinite light of illumination or nothingness.

Wassily Kandinsky believed that of all the arts, abstract art was the most difficult. From its inception, it has been misunderstood or rejected as too difficult to comprehend. Therefore it will help viewers to know about how artists use intuitive forms and visual cues devoid of objective

references to express the divine. Not every abstract work of art is a divine abstraction, but the spiritual dimension has been an influential factor in determining the look and purpose of much of the world's art, including contemporary art. The challenge is to become sensitive to abstract art's spiritual interests, to keep an open mind about its possible presence and how it may work in abstract art.

Susan J. Soriente, Sheldon Statewide Curator

#### Endnotes

- 1 Janice Driesbach, Foreword and Acknowledgments to "The Unknown Blakelock;" Sheldon Museum of Art Catalog, Lincoln, NE, 2008, p10
- 2 Lynn Gamwell, *Exploring the Invisible: Art, Science, and the Spiritual* (Princeton & Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2002), p93
- 3 Wassily Kandinsky, *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*, Monumental Printing Co., Baltimore, MD, 1970, p74
- 4 Marcia J. Wade, "Homage to a Square Man," *Horizon*, April 1988, p 40
- 5 Joanne Ditmer, "Herbert Bayer: The World is His Canvas," *Empire Magazine of the Denver Post*, Nov. 4, 1973
- 6 June Ness ed., *Lyonel Feininger*. New York: Praeger Publishers Inc., 1974, p17
- 7 June Ness ed., *Lyonel Feininger*, p18
- 8 Allen S. Weller, "Rattner in Illinois," *Krannert Art Museum Bulletin*, University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign, Vol III, No. 1 1977
- 9 Salvador Felipe Jacinto Dalí, <http://www.askart.com/askart/artist.aspx?artist=9000030>
- 10 Joan Marter, and Manuel Padorno, "José de Rivera 1904-1985 Memorial Exhibition," Grace Borgenicht Gallery Exhibition Catalog, New York, NY, 1985
- 11 George Lipsitz et al, "Dear Robert I Will See You at the Crossroads," University Art Museum Catalog, Santa Barbara, CA 1995
- 12 Carlene Winslow, "Cheryl Wall & Roger Routson, The Source," *Forum Magazine*, April 17, 1993
- 13 Graham Spencer, "The Meditative Photograph," *Pittsburgh Tribune-Review*, May 27, 2001

## EXHIBITION CHECKLIST

Josef Albers  
*Formulation: Articulation*, 1974  
 two-color serigraph poster, 21  $\frac{5}{8}$  x 21  $\frac{5}{8}$ "  
 UNL—F. M. Hall Collection



Hans Arp  
*Marron, Jaune, Bleu*, undated  
 three-color lithograph, 12  $\frac{1}{2}$  x 9  $\frac{7}{8}$ "  
 UNL—F. M. Hall Collection



Gustave Baumann  
*Immergence*, 1954  
 oil on panel, 27  $\frac{3}{4}$  x 28"  
 NAA—Nebraska Art Association Collection



Herbert Bayer  
*Yellow Centre*, 1970  
 serigraph, 29  $\frac{1}{2}$  x 29  $\frac{1}{2}$ "  
 NAA—Gift of Saul Steinberg through the Martin S. Ackerman Foundation



Ralph Albert Blakelock  
*Heavy Woods – Moonlight*, undated  
 oil on board, 6  $\frac{1}{8}$  x 9  $\frac{3}{4}$ "  
 UNL—Gift of Mrs. Olga N. Sheldon



Leroy K. Burket  
*Crucifixion*, 1952  
 oil on canvas, 38 x 57  $\frac{1}{2}$ "  
 UNL—University Collection



Salvador Dalí  
*Dream of the Cosmic Unity*, about 1958  
 color lithograph, 22  $\frac{13}{16}$  x 17  $\frac{3}{16}$ "  
 NAA—Jean Rathburn Faulkner Memorial



John Day  
*Erebos - Evening*, undated  
 collage, oil and photographs on canvas,  
 18 x 22"  
 UNL—Olga N. Sheldon Acquisition Trust



José de Rivera  
*Construction # 12*, 1955  
 stainless steel, 11  $\frac{1}{2}$  x 13  $\frac{1}{4}$  x 13"  
 UNL-F. M. Hall Collection



Susan Dunkerley  
*This is the Shape of the Soul, #4*, 2001  
 toned gelatin silver print, 24 x 20"  
 UNL-Robert E. Schweser and Fern Beardsley Schweser Acquisition Fund  
 through the University of Nebraska Foundation



Lyonel Feininger  
*Sunday*, 1948  
 watercolor on paper, 18  $\frac{7}{8}$  x 14  $\frac{3}{16}$ "  
 UNL-Gift of Paul W. Speier in memory of Mrs. Albert Speier



Wassily Kandinsky  
*No. VIII, Die Kleine Welten*, 1922  
 woodcut, 10  $\frac{3}{4}$  x 9  $\frac{1}{8}$ "  
 UNL-F. M. Hall Collection



Sister Mary Corita Kent  
*About the Resurrection*, 1962  
 screen print, 22 x 29"  
 UNL-F. M. Hall Collection



Helen Lundeberg  
*Cosmicide*, 1935  
 oil on Masonite, 40 x 24"  
 NAA-Gift of the Peter Kiewit Foundation



Alfred Henry Maurer  
*Double Portrait*, 1930  
 oil on composition board,  
 21  $\frac{1}{2}$  x 18"  
 UNL-Bequest of Bertha Schaefer



Charles Rain  
*Figures with Masks (Berlin)*, 1933  
 oil on canvas, 17  $\frac{3}{4}$  x 24"  
 UNL-Bequest of the artist





Abraham Rattner  
*Hands Upreaching*, 1947  
 oil on canvas, 38  $\frac{3}{16}$  x 51  $\frac{3}{16}$ "  
 UNL-F. M. Hall Collection



Renée Stout  
*Legba (Church of the Crossroads)*, 1998  
 monotype, 25  $\frac{7}{16}$  x 19  $\frac{1}{16}$ "  
 UNL-Mercedes A. Augustine Acquisition Trust



Mark Tobey  
*Icon*, 1949  
 tempera on board, 11  $\frac{3}{4}$  x 15  $\frac{3}{8}$ "  
 UNL-F. M. Hall Collection



Charmion von Wiegand  
*Evolution*, about 1949-50  
 oil on canvas, 30 x 40"  
 UNL-F. M. Hall Collection



Cheryl Wall  
*Apotheosis Series #38*, 1983  
 acrylic on canvas, 48 x 60"  
 NAA-Nebraska Art Association Collection





DIVINE ABSTRACTIONS  
SPIRITUAL EXPRESSIONS IN ART  
2009–2010 EXHIBITION SCHEDULE

**August 25–September 28, 2009**

Chadron State College, Chadron, NE

Sponsor: Chadron State College

**September 30–October 29, 2009**

McKinley Education Center, North Platte, NE

Sponsor: Nebraskaland National Bank

Mike Jacobson, President & CEO

**October 31–November 30, 2009**

Museum of the High Plains, McCook, NE

Sponsor: McCook Arts Council

**January 5–February 5, 2010**

Cornerstone Bank, York, NE

Sponsor: Cornerstone Bank

**February 6–March 5, 2010**

Columbus Art Gallery, Columbus, NE

**March 6–April 4, 2010**

Concordia University, Marxhausen Gallery of Art,

Seward, NE

Sponsor: Concordia University

**April 6–May 4, 2010**

Morton-James Public Library, Nebraska City, NE

**May 6–June 7, 2010**

Library & Arts Center, Stalder Gallery, Falls City, NE

Sponsors: First National Bank & Trust Company, Falls

City, Richardson County Arts & Humanities Council

**June 9–July 9, 2010**

West Nebraska Arts Center, Scottsbluff, NE

*Dates are subject to slight modification.*

*Divine Abstractions* is an exhibition of Sheldon Statewide, an outreach program of the Sheldon Museum of Art, Sheldon Art Association and the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. This exhibition is made possible by the generous support of Farmers Mutual Insurance Company of Nebraska, the Nebraska Arts Council, James and Rhonda Seacrest, and Lonnie Pierson Dunbier.

